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ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that work-related stressors are compounded by the stressors that employees bring to the workplace. Although interdisciplinary interest in the work-family relationship has increased during the past 2 decades, a conceptual understanding of how work affects the family or the reciprocal relationship between family and work has yet to be developed. A number of studies have presented evidence supportive of the hypothesis that individual workers seek or attempt to create work environments similar to their family of origin and that the family of origin concept is useful in understanding the interface of family-work relationships and the epidemic phenomenon of stress, anxiety, and burnout in the workplace. Family psychologists have recently begun applying family theory to an understanding of workplace behaviors and functioning. The relevance of family of origin studies to work systems stems from the concepts of differentiation of self and its applications to work systems and organizational behavior. Increased differentiation of self, whether in families or corporations, has important ramifications in reducing stress, anxiety, and burnout. The model of a "healthy" family is applicable to attempts to understand "healthy" work systems. (Contains 24 references.) (MN)

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THE WORKPLACE AS FAMILY, THE FAMILY AS WORKPLACE

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The Workplace as Family, The Family as Workplace:
Reciprocal Relationships Between Work and Family as
Predictors of Health and Psychological Wellbeing

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Stress is the American style. It is the hidden disability in work and family life. More than a million families break up each year. The children of these divorces, and the children of unbroken homes as well, fall prey to drugs and alcohol. They struggle against depression and suicide, and lose. The number of Americans who are ill each year is on the rise despite advances in medicine (Entin, 1986, 1991; Klerman and Weissman, 1989; Weissman and Merkangas, 1986).

Stress has also been recognized as "the most pervasive and potent toxin encountered in the workplace" (Warshaw, 1989, p. 4). Reporting on the results of a Gallop survey Warsaw concludes that "stress, anxiety and depression are pervasive in many workplaces and lead to high levels of absenteeism and impaired productivity contrast sharply with the extent to which these problems are overlooked or ignored" (Warshaw, 1989, p. 17).

The findings from the 1991 study by Northwestern National Life Insurance Company on "Employee Burnout: America's Newest Epidemic," conducted among 600 workers nationwide identifies the extent, causes, costs and solutions related to workplace stress. The most striking research findings are that (1) "Americans are experiencing job burnout" as evidenced by the report that one in three Americans seriously thought about quitting work in 1990 because of job stress, and a similar proportion of workers expect to experience job "burn out" in the future. Fourteen percent quit or changed jobs in the past two years due to job stress. (2) "Americans are highly stressed." Nearly half of the 600 respondents experienced stress levels as "extremely or very high." One in three say job stress is the single greatest stress in their lives. (3) Workplace changes, such as cutting employee benefits, change of ownership, required frequent overtime or reduced work force, speed up job stress. (4) Job stress is costly to employers with seven out of ten workers saying job stress lowers their productivity, and they experience frequent health ailments. It also causes them to miss one or more days of work a year. The report says that "victims of burnout deserve disability pay from their employer," according to 82 percent of the respondents. (5) Job stress is largely an unrecognized problem among employers.

Reporting on the results of The New York Business Group on Health/Gallop survey results, Dr. Warshaw concludes that "(T)he relationship between occupational stress and anxiety and depression has not been determined with precision" (1989). Citing the work of MacLean from <u>High Tech Survival Kit: Managing Your Stress (1986)</u>, job stressors identified include uncomfortable or unsafe working conditions, quantitative and qualitative overload, role ambiguity and role conflict, lack of control over the work process and the work rate, as well as monotony and boredom. Poor interpersonal relationships with superiors, peers and subordinates may compound these problems

that may be the result of poor management and/or prejudice and harassment based on age, sex, race or ethnic background. The Northwestern National Life Insurance study also reports that "more than half of all employees cite either too much work or working with the public" as contributing to job stress, and suggests a strong correlation between workplace stress and an employees lack of control over how the job is done (1991, p. 9).

Warshaw, goes on to say that "(C)ompounding the work-related stressors are those brought by employees to the workplace (1989, p.17). These include acute and unanticipated stressors, as well as long term stressors, such as caring for an elderly or disabled relative, which affected about a "fourth to a third of the workforce (p 17).

Both of these comprehensive, landmark studies in the field focus on the challenges facing businesses and corporations in changing the workplace environment and "corporate culture" as a way to not only express their concern for the well being of the workforce, but as an intervention "that can influence 'the bottom line'" (Warshaw, p.20).

In another study of workplace stress, known as the Ohio Marketing Project, conducted by the Ohio Psychological Association and the Practice Directorate of the American Psychological Association, the Research and Communications firm of Belden and Russonello found that the "(M)ajorities of the 55 small business managers surveyed report having employees with alcohol problems, job stress, or outside personal problems in the last three years. ... Over half (30) of the 55 small business managers surveyed say productivity in their companies has suffered in the last two years because of employee's emotional or personal problems. ... Divorce or other marital problems are reported to have a greater negative impact on productivity than are alcohol or drug abuse. ...Eighteen managers agree that 'we find that personal and emotional problems tend to show up in the workplace rather quickly'" (November, 1989).

Although in the last two decades there has been a growing interdisciplinary interest in the work-family relationship, as Evans and Bartolome assert, "we do not yet have a conceptual understanding of how work affects family, let alone the reciprocal relationship" (1986, p. 371).

In a study designed to understand the interplay of work and nonwork in the adult adjustment process they conceptualized "the Person - Environment fit" as an explanation for the emotional outcomes of work (1986, p. 381). In essence, it is a way of characterizing whether or not an individual's temperament and personality may find happiness and contentment or frustration and misery on the job. They hypothesize five relationships between professional and private life: "spillover," one affects the other, in a positive or negative way; "independence," they exist side by side for all practical purposes and are independent of

each other; "conflict," they are in conflict with each other and cannot be easily reconciled; "instrumentality," one is primarily a means to obtain something in the other; and ""compensation," one is a way of making up for what is missing in the other (1986, p. 374). Rather than ask the traditional question of "what is the relationship between work and family," Evans and Bartolome conclude that the relationship is experienced in different ways by different people and focused on the more important issue of why people experience the relationship in different ways. To the latter issue, they conclude "the particular way in which people experience the relationship is an important indicator of a person's life role priorities and how those life roles are functioning. Our study led us to develop a model where the emotional outcomes of work interact with the relative importance of work in the life space to determine the relationship" (1986, p. 393). The authors acknowledge that the model emphasizes the influence of work on private life rather than the reciprocal effects.

This is consistent with Renshaw's observation, made a decade earlier, in the article "An Exploration of the Dynamics of the Overlapping Worlds of Work and Family," that "(W)hile it is clear to those working with families that the world of work has an impact on family life, <u>there is little official recognition of the family world from the organization's perspective</u>" [Italics in original] (1976, p. 146). Renshaw found that the two systems were interdependent, but this factor was ignored until "the emergence of problems" and that "(S)tresses in one system are not caused by events in the other system but are a function of the interactive nature of the relationship" (pp. 163-164). Renshaw suggests:

> The family consultant can be aware of the causal explanations family members give to describe work-related problems and can question these assumptions. Organizations must develop mechanisms for integrating the family perspective into relevant organizational decisions (1976, p. 164).

Reviewing the literature in the PsychLIT/Abstracts from 1987 to the present reveals a paucity of empirical studies on the reciprocal relationships between family functioning and workplace behaviors. Out of 250 citations, only 17 appeared potentially relevant, and the actual number of relevant articles far less.

The studies that seemed to offer the most promise to me, based on a quarter of a century of clinical work with individuals and families, however, are those focusing on the family of origin as a way of understanding the interface between the worlds of work and family behaviors. I believe there is a similarity of family dynamics and workplace dynamics based on the experiences of the individual in his or her family of origin that explain the Person-Environment fit concept as proposed by Evans and Bartolome (1986).

I propose that the individual worker seeks, and perhaps to some extent even sometimes attempts to create, a work environment similar to his or her family of origin, and that, furthermore, this concept is useful in trying to understand the interface of family-work relationships and the epidemic phenomenon of stress, anxiety and burnout in the workplace. I believe that although this concept appears to have face validity, it is sorely neglected in the clinical and theoretical literature on the reciprocal relationship between family and work.

In attempting to sensitize therapists to the importance of family of origin experiences that may be affecting our patients when they describe their experiences at work as "family." A good line of inquiry is often about the "family" at work. Patients who are especially caught up in the process will understand immediately and exactly what you mean. Often, such individuals will describe their work system as "a dysfunctional family."

It is only recently that family psychologists have turned their attention to the workplace and applied family theory to an understanding of workplace behaviors and functioning. This is a logical extension of family theory since, as Kerr observes, "(T)he functioning of organizations is mainly influenced by the behavior of people, so a theory of human behavior is tantamount to understanding how organizations operate" (1982, p.1).

Historically, the shift family theory brought about was from the individual perspective to the family as the unit of study. Bowen Family Systems Theory, only one perspective in the family field, but one of the most theoretically developed, is a way of thinking about people and relationships that is applicable to individuals and their extended family relationships as it is to individuals and their workplace relationships.

This is not meant to apply a causal relationship, rather, based on my clinical practice as a family psychologist I have observed that the individual's behavior in his/her family of origin is typically displayed in the symmetry of this behavior in their workplace relationships. Usually, the "tipoff," in my experience, is when an individual describes their workplace as a "dysfunctional family." I have heard some large Fortune 500 companies and intergovernmental agencies described as "dysfunctional families." The similarity that emerged in each of these descriptions was the extent to which the individuals sought out and created their relationships from their family of origin in their work system. This is not merely a replication of previous relationships, unconsciously motivated and performed. Instead, these are conscious choices that are sought after as experiences that are "familiar" based on their experiences in their family of origin.

This is the thesis is expounded in Paula Bernstein's interesting monograph Family Ties, Corporate Bonds (1985). In large measure,

she bases her book on the thesis of Roman and Raley in The Indelible Family (1980) with the emphasis on how individuals attempt to recreate their family of origin in other relationships, a theme also reflected in the writings of Harry Levinson in his counseling and consulting with executives (1991).

In her chapter on "Creating Family," Bernstein describes the process of transforming colleagues into family to shape the success or failure of a career, thus explaining "why personality, style and rapport so often triumph over talent, hard work, or even having the right connections" (p. 7). She, too, concludes that "(A)lthough we may not realize it, or want to admit it, many of us bring our personal lives, with childhood's emotional baggage, to work every day with us, with far greater intensity than we bring work home at night" (p. 9). Thus, we can duplicate these childhood roles at work, we can reject them, we can change them or we can create new roles based on our family of origin experiences.

A similar thesis is proposed in the research by Cochran and associates wherein work and career changes are examined from the perspective of family roles and dramas (1988, 1989). From the proposition that "in working, a person re-stages a drama from one's family of origin" (MacGregor and Cochran, 1988, p. 138), the authors conclude that "(S)ome people resolve old family issues in work. Some attempt to reconcile family schisms. Some attempt to recover losses or achieve gain that they yearned for in family but never had. Still others seek to recreate a harmonious family unit in work" (p. 146). Furthermore, another study demonstrated that while an occupational role generally resembled a family drama, a carer change involved an extension of the family drama to a new setting or a shift to another family drama and sometimes to a unique synthesis of dramatic themes (1989). The reciprocal nature of the family - work interface is reflected, although its significance is underestimated, in their conclusion that "(O)f potential importance, the relationship with one's family of origin is ongoing and often seems to shift as one changes occupations" (Chusid and Cochran, 1989, p. 39). This is actually the closest statement I found in the literature to acknowledge the reciprocal relationship between these systems.

Turning now to the issue of how these family of origin studies are relevant to work systems, I would now like to briefly give an overview of the concept of differentiation of self and applications to work systems and organizational behavior. In this way we can apply our theoretical knowledge about families to understand the workplace as family and family as workplace.

At the heart of Bowen's family systems theory is the concept of "differentiation of self," which means becoming emotionally free of the influence of past generations. The goal is to be in control of one's thoughts and feelings, fantasies, behaviors and actions. The goal of psychotherapy within this framework is to change the patterns of relating, the way individual members of

the family interact and communicate. The functioning of the family is thereby improved, which promotes the growth and differentiation of all the members of the family (Entin, 1992).

Furthermore, if an individual is to change, to differentiate, the context in which he or she lives - the family - must also change. If one individual in the family is symptomatic, all the members of the family are involved in the problem. It is a shared family problem.

The thesis of this paper is that of "the workplace as family, the family as workplace," the individual's behavior in his or her family of origin will be mirrored in the symmetry of his or her behavior in the workplace. For example, this has been studied in the lives of therapists and clergy to understand how their work affects their own lives and those of their families, how their families of origin affect their choice of a profession and their daily work, and how marital or family problems of therapists affect their clinical work. Thus, the behaviors from the family of origin as reflected in family and workplace will be reciprocal and symmetrical.

Within this context, family processes and work events, which are reinactments of family processes, are interpreted as potential stressors.

To reduce the effect of potential stressors, the differentiation of self is prescribed. The treatment is usually done with one individual, such as the most motivated member of the family, or the head of a corporation. The focus is to (1) observe and define patterns of behavior in self and family; (2) reduce anxiety in self and family by reducing one's own over-reactivity to stress-related processes that derive from and are transmitted by the family system, and (3) increasing one's own freedom and control in choosing how to respond in situations.

Reviewing the transgenerational work of Bowen (1972, 1978), Kerr (1981, 1988) and others suggest that therapists' personal issues from their family of origin may block their ability to solve certain family problems. In order to be an effective family therapist one must first work on resolving those issues in his or her own family of origin.

In a series of articles, Dr. Mark Mengel studied how a physician's own family of origin experience can lead to ineffectiveness (1985, 1987). Using concepts of Bowen Family Systems Theory, which described how the lack of differentiation in the therapist's own family of origin can lead to emotional fusion or undifferentiation in the therapeutic relationship, Mengel demonstrated how family of origin issues con lead to loss of neutrality in the therapeutic relationship, causing fusion with the patients' problem maintaining system and resulting in failure to achieve therapeutic goals.

The ineffectiveness usually arose when certain characteristics of the patient's system resembled the physician's own family of origin system. Common patterns included developing alliances or conflicts with the patient or with a part of the patient's family system that closely resembled an alliance or conflict in the physician's own family of origin. Complementariness of the relationship, keeping secrets, avoiding conflicts, or assuming parental responsibilities are other patterns that were observed as leading to therapeutic ineffectiveness.

Piercy and Wetchler also studied the family - work interfaces of psychotherapists, reviewing the literature about the family lives of therapists, they found that while many questions are raised, "there are few answers to such questions" (1987, p. 17). However, their research of stressors and enhancers of marital and family life in the lives of family therapists, and the workshops aimed at helping therapists, are important steps toward identifying the reciprocal effects of work and family in the lives of clinicians.

From a different theoretical perspective, Jenny Firth - Cozzens in England did a longitudinal study of the role of early family experiences in the perception of organizational stress in junior doctors and found that "the level of perceived stress caused by senior doctors was predicted first by the type of hospital and almost as strongly by relationships with fathers. This is seen as an empirical indication of psychoanalytic transference in job stress" (1992, p.61).

Rabbi Ed Friedman has studied the application of Bowen Family System concepts to the emotional life of congregants and their leaders. In his 1985 book Generation to Generation, Friedman conceives of the congregation as a "family" and compares the emotional processes at work within individual families to those in the church and synagogue. He describes the process of leadership through the differentiation of self in a congregational family thusly: "If a leader will take primary responsibility for his or her own position as "head" and work to define his or her own goals and self, while staying in touch [italics in original] with the rest of the organism, there is more than a reasonable chance that the body will follow. (1985, p. 229).

In another study with ministers, Henry and associates developed a 22 item measure of emotional triangles based on the writings of Bowen and Friedman and report that the "results do suggest that a relationship exists between organizational characteristics, interpersonal stress, and stress responses in which family of origin contact plays a buffering role" (1991, p. 949).

The impact of job travel, whether temporary or recurrent, on the worker and their families is another source of stress to many employees and their families. For about a year I wrote a monthly column for a railroad employees newspaper dealing with the

stresses workers and their families experience in what I called "turnstile marriages" also called commuter marriages. When I was writing the columns I was not aware of any of the literature in the area. In these families, the worker comes home for the weekend and departs again during the week, only to repeat this pattern week in and week out. While I wrote about the expectations, roles and accommodations that the families must make to adjust to these changes and to diminish stress, I wondered about the family of origin issues involved, especially as many railroad workers, as well as fishermen, career military service individuals, to name a couple of professions, have perpetuated this lifestyle and career choice over multiple generations. I wondered how many of family issues, especially distance - closeness, are family explanations for understanding work choices. Here is where the concept of person/environment fit may be useful in understanding how some see this carer choice as stressful while others do not. This is a fertile area for studying the interface of work and family.

In conclusion, quoting again from Friedman, "And so we have come full circle. To the extent that we can learn to define ourselves within the emotional triangles of our families of origin, to that same extent will we have the increased capacity to do this in any of our other relationship systems. And in the process of doing so, our position in that set of interlocking triangles will become converted from a source of stress to a source of strength and survival" (1985, p. 309). Increased differentiation of self, whether in a family or a corporation, has important ramifications in reducing stress, anxiety and burnout. The family model of a "healthy" family, where individuals are in control of their own responses and accept responsibility for their own actions, is applicable to the workplace in understanding "healthy" work systems. Thus we, too, have come full circle in understanding "the workplace as family, the family as workplace."

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